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POL -- FOR J. MAXSTADT

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: DIFFERENT INSIDER VIEWS ON THE PDP CONVENTION

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: The PDP convention was a study of rough-hewn politics. All participants agree the convention was not for the faint-hearted; but they also give differing, sometimes conflicting, versions of what happened. We probably will never fully know the complete truth because so much was blurred by the hectic pace of events and distorted by the person's political bias. However, we can state with confidence that the actual vote count did not accurately reflect the heated competition at the convention. Less than one day before the vote, delegates were more evenly divided between Ekwueme and President Obasanjo. The power of incumbency and the liberal use of pay-offs tipped the scale in Obasanjo's favor, turning what looked like a close race on January 4 into an Obasanjo landslide by the morning of January 5. What follows are observations of the convention by three insiders. We provide them to afford Washington a view of what many players perceived as what happened behind the scenes and not necessarily as the complete picture of what transpired at the convention. End Comment.

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From Inside The Villa  
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12. (C) While the voting was being conducted at the PDP convention late into the night of January 5, PolCouns met Tunji Abayomi (strictly protect), Obasanjo's private attorney before the President assumed Nigeria's highest office. Now an informal advisor to the President, Abayomi described a panicky President and coterie the previous day. Obasanjo and his aides were caught off-guard when, on the eve of the convention, PDP state governors decided to abandon the President. Confronted with this betrayal, Obasanjo issued an "all hands-on-deck" call. Responding to this mayday, Abayomi spent most of January 4 at the Villa huddling with numerous Obasanjo advisors, confidants and friends.

13. (C) The President was dazed, Abayomi recalled. Jarred by the unexpected possibility of defeat, the usually know-it-all Obasanjo eagerly solicited counsel on how to escape the closing vise. Early that day, the dominant theme was to seek a court injunction postponing the convention. Proponents suggested the delay to afford Obasanjo time to marshal support and undermine Ekwueme's momentum. However, this idea was ultimately discarded, partially because of apprehension over the public's reaction. More importantly, the push for an injunction became less urgent when the President's advisors began to sense their man was regaining ground by the hour.

14. (C) The President owed much of his recovery to his own tenacity and, at times, shamelessness. He pulled out virtually all the stops to clinch the nomination, according to Abayomi. For most of that day, the President's diet consisted of liberal portions of humble pie. The President pleaded and cajoled; on at least two occasions his eyes welled with emotion as he pursued fence-sitting delegates and governors. However, Obasanjo saved his best to keep Vice President Atiku from defecting.

15. (C) With rumor swirling that Atiku would opt to run with Ekwueme, Obasanjo wasted no time visiting the Vice President's residence. Obasanjo begged, declaring he would not leave Atiku's home unless the Vice President accompanied him to win back the

delegates and governors. The performance had the desired effect. Atiku joined Obasanjo in publicly lobbying the conventioners. While it might not have been Obasanjo's finest hour it was the defining moment of the convention. What had been a suspenseful contest would now turn into a rout.

16. (C) Abayomi thought the convention had taught Obasanjo some valuable lessons. The President learned that victory was a collective effort but defeat was solitary; the President, despite all the trappings of office and the buzz of advisors, was a frightened and lonely figure much of January 4. Abayomi thought Obasanjo would show more humility and act less imperiously as a consequence.

17. (C) However, Abayomi admitted Obasanjo could easily learn the wrong lessons from the convention victory. The events could reinforce the notion that the coercive powers of his office are a President's chief assets. Abayomi admitted the pleading and cajolery would not have worked without the underlying threat that, even if he lost the convention, Obasanjo still would retain the presidency for another five months. During that period, he could wreck the political ambitions of those who sided against him. It was this reality that kept the Vice President in line and with him, the governors, and ultimately the delegates. All things being equal, Ekwueme would probably have won the convention, Abayomi contended. Obasanjo was disliked by most of the political elite, while most people think highly of Ekwueme, he said. However, the conventioners' fear of Obasanjo ultimately corralled their respect for Ekwueme. The convention boiled down to a street fight between a hard-nosed bully and a reserved intellectual. In the end, the bully won.

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The View From The Ekwueme Group  
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18. (C) During a January 9 conversation with DCM and PolCouns, Alhaji Isaiku Ibrahim, Ekwueme's campaign coordinator, fulminated that Obasanjo cheated his way to victory. Ibrahim's delegate count the morning of January 5 revealed a virtual dead heat between Obasanjo and Ekwueme; thus, Ekwueme's camp anticipated a second ballot not an Obasanjo first round landslide. Ibrahim acknowledged that throughout January 4 and into the early hours of January 5, Ekwueme's fortunes began to crumble. He cited several reasons for the change. First, Obasanjo's camp generously showered delegates and governors with money. Ibrahim contended governors were given 30 million Naira each while every delegate received at least 1,000 dollars. The Obasanjo campaign, not the PDP, paid for the delegates' hotel rooms. Ibrahim claimed Obasanjo's team required so much money to pass around that the Central Bank and Habib Bank kept their doors open Friday and Saturday nights. (Comment: Money was certainly passed around at the convention, but Ibrahim's figures are high even by Nigerian standards. More importantly, Ekwueme's team should not protest too loudly. Ekwueme received support from former Head of State Babangida; if Babangida is in the mix, money cannot be too far behind. There were numerous reports that Ekwueme's team also paid for delegate support. End Comment.)

19. (C) Early on Saturday, Obasanjo was in deep trouble and he knew it, maintained Ibrahim. Obasanjo's campaign roused a High Court judge from his sleep to prepare the ground for an ex parte motion to enjoin the convention. Ibrahim said Obasanjo's minions dropped this idea after the angry judge chided that their antics not only disturbed his sleep but also his professional integrity; if they filed the motion, he would summarily deny it, the judge promised.

110. (C) Ibrahim claimed Obasanjo's campaign then began tinkering with delegate accreditation. They successfully padded the delegate lists of some states while substituting new lists for other states. He asserted this manipulation of delegate lists demonstrated that the PDP machinery was not neutral, but an adjunct of the Obasanjo campaign. PDP chairman Audu Ogbah had compromised his integrity, declared Ibrahim. (Comment: Others say that Ogbah had saved the

day and that it was VP Atiku who wanted to cancel the convention to afford himself more time to a way to ease Obasanjo out and take first place on the ticket without infuriating the President. End Comment.)

11. (C) The Ekwueme team's biggest complaint was the vote counting procedures at the convention. The party had agreed to conduct the vote by secret ballot, ostensibly to minimize the fear of intimidation. However, Obasanjo's team used numbered ballots to achieve the very thing (intimidation) the secret ballot was to eliminate. The numbered ballots were the tip of an elaborate scheme to intimidate delegates, according to Ibrahim. He claimed Ekwueme had been hoodwinked by Ogbeh, who ironically was Ekwueme's campaign manager in the 1980's. Prior to the convention, Ogbeh had guaranteed he would keep the ballot paper close-hold to prevent tampering. Because of their past relationship, Ekwueme trusted Ogbeh. Thus, Ekwueme did not request to examine the ballot papers prior to the convention. This was an irreparable mistake, Ibrahim asserted. With the ballots numbered, the President's team could determine how each delegate voted.

12. (C) Ibrahim maintained the President and Vice President pressured the governors to deliver their states or risk the overturn of their own re-nominations. In turn, the governors put their feet on the neck of their respective state chairmen. The state chairmen were told to record the numbered ballots given to each delegate; more ominously, they were instructed to make sure the delegate knew a ledger was being kept so that their votes could be traced, maintained Ibrahim.

13. (C) Even with these devices, the Obasanjo-Atiku team was not completely sure of victory. They continued to pressure governors as the vote was being conducted. Ibrahim claimed VP Atiku cornered Niger Governor Kure, reminding Kure a favor was owed. The Vice President reminded Kure, an Obasanjo foe and a friend of former Head of State Babangida, that Atiku has supported Kure for renomination in Niger while Obasanjo and the rest of the party hierarchy backed Commerce Minister Bello. Calling in his chip, Atiku said now was Kure's time to reciprocate. Unless he backed the Obasanjo-Atiku ticket, Atiku threatened that both he and Obasanjo would make Kure's life unbearable. Ibrahim also described Kaduna State governor Makarfi as waffling. Prior to the convention, Makarfi met Ekwueme and personally pledged to deliver Kaduna's delegates. After being threatened by Obasanjo, Makarfi reversed direction. While other states were voting, Makarfi reportedly gathered several key delegates from Kaduna pleading with them to return to Obasanjo. Makarfi said he would "lose his job" if Kaduna did not vote Obasanjo.

14. (C) Ibrahim maintained that most delegates recognized Ekwueme was better qualified and intellectually superior to Obasanjo. However, he accused Obasanjo of scare tactics and bullying his way to victory. Ibrahim had no kind words for VP Atiku. Ibrahim felt Atiku was the person who most influenced the convention due to the relationship with the governors. Atiku disliked Obasanjo but listened to expediency's counsel and stuck with the President. Atiku ultimately was too frightened that Obasanjo would ruin him if he defected, Ibrahim asserted. Obasanjo needed Atiku now. But given Obasanjo's history of ingratitude and untrustworthiness, Ibrahim predicted Obasanjo would dump Atiku after the general election.

15. (C) Because of the perceived irregularities with the convention. Ekwueme's camp had not "recognized" the result. Ibrahim stated they were undecided whether to quit the party or to continue to challenge the convention results from within. Whatever decision is made, will be done as a bloc, he said. (Note: Ekwueme filed a lawsuit to overturn the convention results. The court denied his request for a temporary injunction prohibiting the PDP from referring to Obasanjo as the winner. However, the court will still hear the substantive issues raised in Ekwueme's suit at a later date. End Comment.)

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One Governor's Perception

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16. (C) In a post-convention discussion with Ambassador Jeter, Kaduna Governor Makarfi asserted that Ekwueme's candidacy was never a serious threat to Obasanjo. The report that he and other governors had shifted to Ekwueme was a complete feign. The governors leaked the story to "teach Obasanjo a lesson" to end his autocratic ways. Makarfi said Ekwueme's candidacy was ill fated because he procrastinated by waiting to announce his candidacy a mere one month before the convention. He logically could not have expected to catch Obasanjo within such a brief time. Second, Ekwueme erred by canvassing delegates independently instead of first talking to the governors who resented being short-circuited. Ekwueme learned the hard way that the governors control the state machinery, Makarfi said.

17. (C) Last, many governors opposed Ekwueme because he had never explicitly repudiated a proposal he published in 1994 to reshape Nigeria into a confederation of relatively autonomous regions. This proposal, coupled with the fact that Ekwueme might be sympathetic to Igbo secessionists, caused governors to fear an Ekwueme presidency could occasion the dismemberment of Nigeria. (Comment: Makarfi's points, particularly the belated concern about the 1994 confederation proposal, seem somewhat contrived. It seems that Makarfi was trying to put the best gloss on his vacillations during the convention. End comment.)

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What A Convention It Was

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18. (C) By all accounts, the convention was spirited drama. The day before the vote was a day of high anxiety. Obasanjo and Ekwueme's fortunes waxed and waned several times that day. Vice President Atiku occupied an extraordinary position. If any one person determined the outcome, it was Atiku. However, his situation was bittersweet. Courted by both Obasanjo and Ekwueme, he could do no worse than emerge as the Vice Presidential candidate; however, he also could do no better. Atiku recognized the irony of his position, although he certainly did not enjoy it. Meanwhile, the PDP governors affirmed that they were powerful players, yet, in the end they did not buck the President.

19. (C) Backslapping, back-room deals, and backtracking from promises made were all represent and well accounted for during the convention. This was a classic lesson in hardball politics. Throughout the convention, principle was told to sit still and behave while the players cut and uncut deals unmolested by any tinge of conscience. The convention was about people protecting and promoting their narrow interests. Political conventions traditionally are not profiles in rectitude but contests of ambition, avarice and advantage. This one was no different. It was both worse and better than it could have been. Competition was limited to political tricks and treachery -- there was no violence or physical intimidation. Money exchanged hands but probably in lesser amounts than in 1999. For all its demerits, the convention was what realistically could be expected for a second edition of a party convention in a fledgling democracy like that of Nigeria.

JETER